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Crime, Drugs, and Race

by
Wornie L. Reed

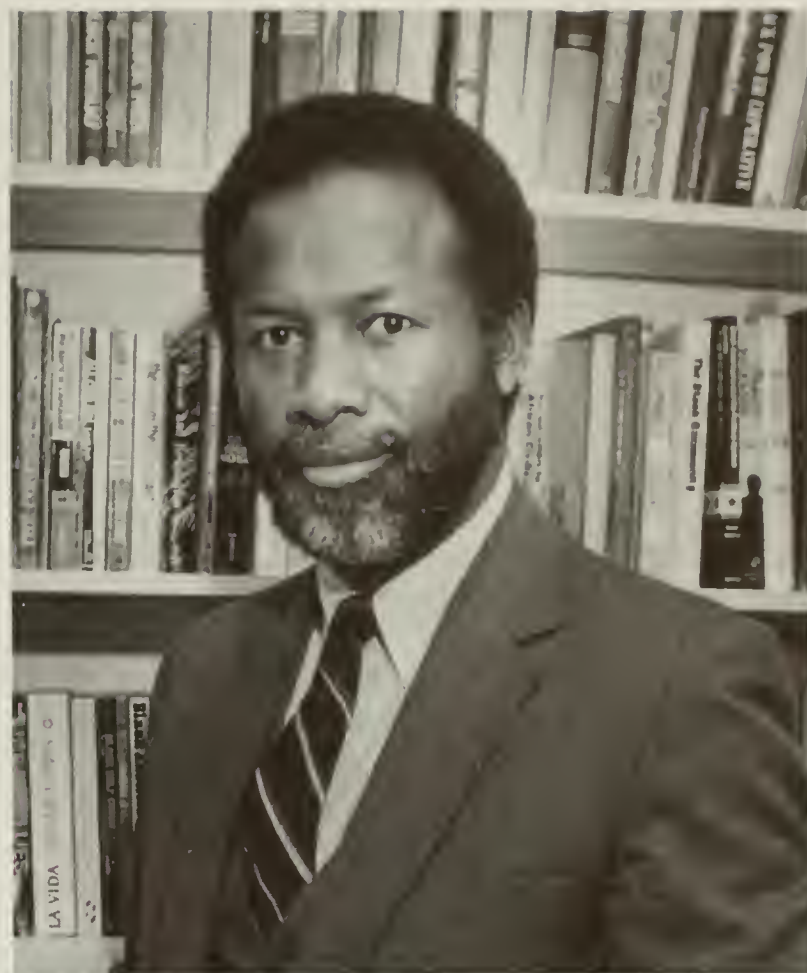
The crime and criminal record statistics of black Americans are frightening; and they keep getting worse. Blacks represent 12% of the population of the United States, yet:

- 40% of death row inmates are black;
- 50, or 43% of persons executed in the 1980s were black;
- Blacks are 42% of the jail population and 45% of the state and federal prison population;
- Blacks are 31% of arrestees;
- Blacks are 49% of all murder and nonnegligent homicide victims;
- Black males in the United States are incarcerated at a rate four times higher than black males in South Africa — 3,109 per 100,000 in the population compared to 729; and
- In 1986, the total number of black men of all ages in college was 426,000, while the number of black men between the ages of 20 and 29 under the control of the criminal justice system (incarcerated, on parole, or on probation) was 609,690.¹

These figures, of course, give us pause. Yet, it must be kept in mind that none of these figures demonstrates that blacks as a race are more prone to crime. Rather, the figures show that the average black person in the United States is more likely than the average white person to be so situated in the social structure that he or she is more likely to be involved in crime, with an even higher likelihood of being arrested, convicted, and imprisoned.

For persons who tend to assume that the relatively high rate of black participation in the criminal justice system is because of nature, or genetics, instead of the social environment or social conditions, an arithmetic exercise may be instructive. Korn and McCorkle reminded us that such racial determinism must take into consideration racial mixture:

[A]ny valid racial study of criminality should apportion the criminality of these [racially mixed] groups under both white and Negro categories. Thus, in figuring the totals of white and Negro offenders, unmixed whites and unmixed Negroes would count as one (1.0) for each racial category; every person seven-



eighths white would add 0.875 to the white and 0.125 to the Negro categories; each person three-quarters white would add 0.75 to the white and 0.25 to the Negro categories; the equally mixed, 0.5 to each category, etc.²

Melville Herskovits estimated that of all persons classified as Negro, almost 15% were more white than black, approximately 25% were equally white and black, approximately 32% were more black than white, and approximately 6% were black mixed with Indian, leaving about 22% unmixed.³ Herskovits thus concluded that about 40% of persons classified as blacks are more white than black or at least half white, which led Korn and McCorkle to suggest that almost 40% of offenders contributing to the total of “Negro” crime are either half or more than half white, and that corrections of the totals of Negro offenders would have the effect of redistributing a very considerable number of criminals from the black to the white side of the ledger.⁴

Of course, it is evident that we cannot determine the accuracy of such estimations of racial mixture. The point is, however, that even such a simplistic exercise should force us away from considerations of racial determinism as an explanation for the differentials in crime statistics and toward examinations of social factors—community dynamics as well as social structure. It should be clear that cultural, experiential, and other environmental factors are relevant. Such factors, of course, include antiblack bias

by the community, police, prosecutors, judges, and juries (see related article by Moss in this issue).

Illegal Drug Use

Blacks are also seen as being disproportionately involved in drugs. A common image of black urban communities is that they are places of high crime and illegal drug activity. Daily media reports propagate — if not create — this image because most of the individuals covered in these activities in the news media are black. Data shown in tables 1 and 2 indicate quite clearly that there is a significant difference between the actual criminal activity of blacks — especially drug use — and public perception.

Table 1, for instance, shows that black males do not differ very much from white males in overall illicit drug use; nor do black females differ much from white females. Whites, in fact, have a higher rate of illegal drug use than blacks until the age of 35. After the age of 35 black rates exceed white rates. The same comparisons obtain in the use of cocaine specifically. And, as table 2 exhibits, white high school students also use drugs at higher rates than do black students. Only with heroin use does black student use exceed the reported use by white students.

Table 1

Percentage of Illicit Drug Use by Age, Sex, and Race

Age/Sex	Any Illicit Drug Use, Ever		Cocaine Use, Ever	
	White	Black	White	Black
Total	37.8	37.2	12.4	9.9
Male	42.4	44.5	16.0	14.8
Female	33.6	31.0	9.0	5.7
12-17 years	30.7	24.4	5.1	2.9
Male	31.2	28.7	6.2	4.5
Female	30.3	20.1	4.0	1.2
18-25 years	69.1	55.1	28.3	13.4
Male	68.6	62.1	31.8	16.3
Female	69.5	49.0	24.8	11.0
26-34 years	65.9	56.3	27.0	17.2
Male	73.8	61.4	33.3	23.5
Female	58.2	52.0	20.9	11.7
35+ years	20.3	25.2	4.0	7.6
Male	24.9	34.5	6.8	14.1
Female	16.4	17.9	1.6	2.4

Source: National Institute of Drug Abuse. (1986). *1985 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Population Estimates*. Washington, DC: Author.

These illegal drug use data contrast sharply with both the image consistently put forth by media reports and with the apparent activity of law enforcement officials, each of which appears to focus on blacks and the black community. Since whites use illegal drugs at least as much as blacks and since there

are some seven times more whites than blacks in the country, an equitable distribution of images of drug

Table 2

Lifetime, Annual, and Thirty-Day Prevalence of Drug Use by Race, High School Senior Class of 1988

	Race	
	White	Black
Approximate Weighted N:	11,900	2,000
Marijuana/Hashish		
Lifetime	49.9%	36.6%
Annual	36.2	19.7
30-Day	19.9	9.8
Inhalants		
Lifetime	18.5	8.4
Annual	7.5	2.9
30-Day	2.9	1.8
Cocaine		
Lifetime	12.8	6.4
Annual	8.4	3.7
30-Day	3.7	1.4
"Crack"		
Lifetime	4.8	3.4
Annual	3.1	2.6
30-Day	1.5	1.3
Other Cocaine		
Lifetime	12.8	5.2
Annual	7.8	2.1
30-Day	3.2	1.5
Heroin		
Lifetime	1.1	1.4
Annual	0.4	0.8
30-Day	0.2	0.5
Alcohol		
Lifetime	94.2	84.4
Annual	89.0	69.9
30-Day	69.5	40.9
Cigarettes		
Lifetime	68.9	54.3
30-Day	32.3	12.8

Source: National Institute of Drug Abuse. (1989). *Drug Abuse Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities*. Washington, DC: Author.

users in the media would dictate up to seven times more whites than blacks.

Drugs and crime are two major scourges in U.S. society in general and in black communities in particular. As we attempt to solve these problems it is vitally important to have accurate data. Perhaps the information presented in this article can help in that endeavor.

References

1. These statistics are taken from the following sources: Garwood, A. N. (1991). *Black Americans: A Statistical Sourcebook*. Boulder, CO: Numbers and Concepts; Horton, C. P., & Smith, J. C. (1990). *Statistical Record of Black America*. New York: Gale Research; and Hoskins, L. A. (1991, April). *Institute for African American Affairs Newsletter*, 15 (3). Kent, OH: Kent State University.
2. Korn, R. R., & McCorkle, L. W. (1959). *Criminology and Penology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. P. 231.

3. Herskovits, M. J. (1930). *The Anthropometry of the American Negro*. New York: Columbia University Press.
4. Korn & McCorkle. (1959). *Criminology and Penology*.

Wornie L. Reed, Ph.D., is director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute and chair of the Black Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

Announcement

Wornie L. Reed will be leaving the William Monroe Trotter Institute September 1, 1991, to become director of the new Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Education and the Urban Child at Cleveland State University. Under his leadership the Trotter Institute has become a nationally known resource on black political, social, cultural, and economic issues. He will be missed, and we wish him much success in his new position.

We are pleased to announce that James Jennings, professor of political science and director of the Trotter Institute's Community Research and Technical Assistance Program, has agreed to serve as interim director of the Trotter Institute.
